

Soccer Diplomacy Finds a Common Voice

World Cup Sports Initiative June 10-24, 2006

With programs like the U.S. Department of State's World Cup Sports Initiative, "sports diplomacy" will have an impact on the lives of 30 young soccer players and the hundreds of Americans, Germans, and others who met them long after the FIFA 2006 World Cup final match.



Fahad from Bahrain and Henry from Uganda
get pumped up for a match

Thirteen girls and seventeen boys, representing thirteen different countries from around the world, came together and showed that even during one of the world's fiercest sports competitions we can build bridges of understanding. A partnership between the U.S. Department of State, the U.S. Soccer Foundation, the U.S. Soccer Federation, and Major League Soccer (MLS), the World Cup Sports Initiative highlighted the theme of the 2006 World Cup, "a time to make friends" with an emphasis on building international understanding and respect between young people around the world. These young soccer players participated in

events in Washington, D.C., New York City, and Germany that showed how engaging youth through something they all love can spark a meaningful and lasting cross-border dialogue.

The U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) worked with U.S. embassies and local soccer clubs and federations to identify the participants, ages 13-18, from Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Bolivia.

During their very first act as youth ambassadors, the delegation met the President George W. Bush at the White House. By presenting President Bush with one of their "Sports United" team jerseys, the group began to grow their global team. "It was really great to visit the White House, but an even more unbelievable experience to get to meet and shake the hand of the president of the United States," said Anna from Uzbekistan. "I don't even want to wash my hand after he shook it," she said.



President Bush joins the global team



Freddie Adu talks with the group and signs autographs following a DC United practice

Following this exciting event, the group got to see the enthusiasm that exists for soccer in the U.S., a relative newcomer to the sport by global standards. The delegation attended a Congressional viewing party for the U.S./Czech Republic match hosted by the US Soccer Foundation on Capitol Hill and then had their skills tested by Jim Gabarra and Clyde Watson, former coaches of the women's professional soccer team the Washington Freedom, at the Maryland Soccerplex facility. Ibrahim, a midfielder from Nigeria, was impressed by what he saw. "When I came to the United States I thought they would only play basketball here, but I am shocked to see so many soccer fields and soccer players."

The next day, the delegation got the chance to learn more about the structure of sports in the United States. DC United showed them what a professional soccer practice looks like in the U.S. Several of DC United's players, including star Freddy Adu, signed autographs and posed for photographs with the young players they may one day face in international competition. The global delegation then got the opportunity to see how grass roots community sports programs serve young people and provide a positive outlet. Through basketball, volleyball and hula-hoops, the group found common ground with the kids at the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Washington. Lastly, the delegation got to see professional female athletes in action as both the girls and the boys cheered the Women's National Basketball Association's (WNBA) Washington Mystics on to victory over the Charlotte Sting.



Shamila from Afghanistan and Anna from Uzbekistan are both excited to show off their autographs



Rayane from Lebanon learns how meaningful the Boys & Girls club is for local youth



The boys cheer on the WNBA Washington Mystics



Gustavo from Bolivia takes on a University of Maryland defender

The World Cup Sports Initiative, implemented by the Delphi International Program of World Learning, worked to help these young players discover how success in athletics — with an emphasis on teamwork, respect, leadership, and conflict resolution — can translate into the development of life skills and academic achievement. During a training session with the University of Maryland men's and women's teams, coach Sasho Cirovski drove home the importance of academic rigor and personal motivation. In another session, Dr. Karina Korostelina of George Mason University led the group in a discussion about conflict resolution, using examples from the international soccer community to discuss broader issues and themes. The delegation shared these experiences in a special meeting with Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice and Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes at the Department of State. Under Secretary Hughes believes that "Sports is a common language that fosters dialogue across borders. These young people are the future leaders of our world and it is a privilege to be a part of introducing them to America and to each other."



The group learns more about life in America at a home hospitality hosted by U/S Hughes



From Afghanistan, China and Lebanon, the girls show that they know how to play

It was then back to soccer, as the global delegation took on two elite youth soccer teams from McLean, Virginia, the MPS 90 boys and the FC girls. The participants were excited to meet American youth and share in two friendly and competitive matches. "Everybody speaks soccer," said Memory from Uganda. "People can't [always] communicate through language, but they can communicate through soccer." The delegation also shared their soccer skills at a training session with Headfirst. This organization's focus on positive coaching methods gave the participants the chance to see the impact that they might be able to have on other young people interested in soccer. Their session with Top Soccer, an organization focused on providing

opportunities in soccer for youth with disabilities, allowed the participants to think about the benefits of soccer training and the different groups of people who can come together through this sport.

On June 17th, it was off to New York City. The delegation watched the Major League Soccer (MLS) New York Red Bulls defeat the Los Angeles Galaxy, 2-1, and was introduced on the field at half time. The group had the opportunity to display their skills during a training session hosted by MLS in Bryant Park and later, during a lunch at the MLS Headquarters, the young soccer players had an opportunity to speak with several employees of MLS about their shared love of soccer and careers paths that might take them off the pitch, but keep them close to the game.



The global youth put their skills on display at a clinic hosted by Major League Soccer in downtown New York City

On June 19, the participants were the guests of honor at a reception hosted by United Nations Ambassador John Bolton. The reception was attended by Permanent Representatives from the participants' countries, members of the New York Red Bulls soccer team, the Commissioner of Major League Soccer, the NY City Sports Commissioner, and other dignitaries.

Throughout their time in Washington D.C. and New York City, the group participated in events that gave them the opportunity to learn more about life in America. Ibrahim



Ambassador Bolton happily accepts his "Sports United" jersey

from Nigeria said

that these experiences allowed him to see the U.S. differently than he had heard about it in the past. "This is my first time outside of Nigeria and I am very impressed. People say the U.S. is not good, but this is a nice experience for me. I would really like to play in the U.S. or Germany someday."



U/S Karen Hughes and the delegation celebrate the U.S. goal at the World Cup match in Nuremberg

Following their time in the U.S., the

delegation was off to Germany to join in the excitement and the fervor surrounding the 2006 FIFA World Cup. On June 22, Under Secretary Karen Hughes led the delegation to a World Cup match. She and the 30 youth participants cheered on the U.S. national team as they faced Ghana in the group phase of the competition. While the cheers were not enough for victory, as the U.S. team fell to Ghana 2-1, the delegation was able to see world-class soccer on its most international stage.



Sardor from Uzbekistan cheers on the U.S. team as they face Ghana in the World Cup



U/S Hughes and the delegation meet with Ambassador Timken, President of U.S. Soccer Sunil Gulati and U.S. national team coach Bruce Arena before the World Cup match



The global boys and girls teams joined with Eintracht Frankfurt and KSV Weckesheim to exhibit the spirit of friendly competition

The youth soccer players spent two days in Nuremberg and participated in a full program that included sharing training tips with fellow players from the local Bertolt Brecht School. The delegation was thrilled to meet with the U.S. national team coach Bruce Arena and two players from the team before attending the match. Following the match, the group enjoyed a post-game reception hosted by Ambassador Timken and Nuremberg Mayor Dr. Ulrich Maly.

Back in Frankfurt, both the boys and girls teams were able to scrimmage against local German club teams in their age groups, Eintracht Frankfurt (boys) and KSV Weckesheim (girls). The international boys team was

able to secure a 2-1 victory in the friendly match over Eintracht Frankfurt, despite the much longer team experience and home-field advantage of the Germans. The girls teams decided to mix up their players and have both international and German players work together side-by-side. No matter how the game was played, soccer brought together young men and women from all corners of the world.

Reflecting, the young participants looked forward to sharing their experiences in the United States and Germany with their friends and families back home. "I'll tell them about all the things I learned here," said Yasmeen from Bahrain. "How to work with each other, how to communicate with different people from different countries." The participants in the World Cup Sports Initiative are now back home, but the impact of this unique program will live on long after the final whistle of this year's World Cup.



Yun from China shares a handshake and a gift with a KSV Weckesheim player following their friendly match

Unlike the action at some of the World Cup games, there were no major injuries, no bad calls, and no yellow or red cards at these events. Only one ball, two goal posts, thirty new friends, and a lifetime of memories.



The boys will take these lasting global friendships home to Uganda, Morocco, Lebanon, and Nigeria